

**TEACHING AND COACHING INDIVIDUALS:  
THE USE OF LEARNING STYLES IN FORENSICS COACHING**

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When I ask myself how to approach the issue of training coaches in competitive speech and debate, I find myself posing a different question. It seems that before I can ascertain what could or should be done to train coaches effectively or to train effective coaches I need to know what it is these coaches are expected to do. The answer to this question must then determine what kind of training would be appropriate.

There are many approaches one could take when trying to define the function of the forensics coach. Many things are required of the successful and "good" coach. An intimate knowledge of the activity and its requirements, motivational skills and administrative skills are just a few of these and all ought to be included in the training of coaches. However, I find myself coming back to one aspect that often seems to be ignored, possibly because it is so much a part of our image of a forensics coach that we see no need to state it explicitly. The forensics coach is a teacher.

Forensics is an educational activity and one of the reasons why we hold it in such high esteem is our knowledge that students can gain more from this activity than competitive success and "hardware." This is not to say that these are not important aspects; competition is an integral part of the activity. But when I ask myself what can be gained from participation in Forensics, my immediate answers include such things as the ability to interpret literature, critical thinking, learning when to follow the rules and when to bend them a little, research skills, organizational skills, accepting victory or defeat gracefully. Clearly, this is not a comprehensive list, but it does show that what forensics can teach goes far beyond the realm of speech and debate.

What does this mean for the training of coaches? It appears that it means that we have to recognize the great opportunity we have to teach. If we look at the time we spend with competitors in small groups or one-on-one

situations, and then consider how often we wish we could do more of that with the students in the classes that we teach, we can clearly recognize the opportunities. In order to take advantage of these, we have to see ourselves as teachers as well as coaches. Thus, the training of coaches should include teaching methods and ways to use these methods while coaching.

Most coaches are active in the classroom and know what works for them there and what does not. Many "coaches in training" are also teaching assistants who are trying to find that out. Classes, journal articles, and panels at conventions, among other things, expose us to new developments in teaching, show us new techniques or lead us back to old ones that have been found to be effective after all. Thus, we continually try to improve our classroom teaching by trying new things and keeping abreast of new developments.

It seems to me that for the forensics coach the next step should be to take these new ideas and find ways to incorporate them in our coaching. Quite often we might find new ways to teach our competitors, ways that benefit them competitively as well as in other areas.

I have tried to take the concept of learning styles and find aspects that might be useful for the forensics coach and competitor. I will briefly explain what the concept entails and then make some suggestions as to how it could be incorporated into forensics coaching.

Learning style has been defined as a biologically and developmentally imposed set of personal characteristics that make the same teaching method effective for some and ineffective for others. Everyone has an individual learning style, and thus instruction and teaching methods may be adapted toward these individual styles. There are various models describing learning styles using varying nomenclature. However, all models acknowledge the uniqueness of every learner.

Because there are various models there are also various tools to discover one's personal preferences. One of the most widely respected is that developed by Rita and Kenneth Dunn. Their "Productivity Environmental Preference Survey" is used to determine the learning styles of students in various aspects, including the environment, emotional, psychological and

sociological aspects, and physical preferences. Based on the answers to the survey-questions, a scale is created that tells us under what conditions the student learns most effectively. These conditions include such things as bright or dim light, cool or warm temperatures, and the time of day. Additionally, it gives us information whether the student learns best alone or with others, whether auditory or visual learning is most effective, and if the student wants a high or low level of structure. This information can then be used by the student to introduce into their learning environment those elements that may have been missing before. It can also be used by the teacher to structure assignments and activities so that they may be completed successfully.

For the forensics coach this information could be very helpful. Let us assume that at the beginning of a student's forensics career we have them complete one such survey. This may be the first time that the student has done this and so many of the results may come as a surprise to the student. Not only will we be able to adapt some of our coaching but the student may very well be able to use the results in other classes. Effective learning takes less time than ineffective learning, and thus we might be blessed with a student who can use time more effectively, and thus spend more time on Forensics. We all know that students have many other things to do; if we can help them do these other things more effectively, the result may be students who are not quite as "stressed" as they often are. More than just giving us students who are more effective learners in general, however, the results of the survey can be used to design coaching more individually.

One example is the pesky problem of memorization. As we all know many students have trouble memorizing their speeches or pieces. In this case, the determination whether someone is a visual or auditory learner can be extremely helpful. A lot of time and frustration may be saved by providing students who are auditory learners with a tape of their speech that they may use to memorize it. On the other hand, for visual learners a clean, clearly legible copy may be the answer.

For those in Extemporaneous Speaking this may be another indication that watching television or listening to the radio is not useless. While it may be harder to file, the information learned from these sources is valuable and may be easier to access for the auditory learner.

The determination at what time of the day a student functions best may lead us to make appointments for that time of day, if possible. This may save us the frustration of having very unproductive sessions during the morning with those of us who work better during the afternoon.

Those students who prefer a structured approach to learning may benefit from clear assignments given to them during the process of speechwriting. Giving deadlines for such things as outlines, research, and a first draft may be something that we are hesitant to do, but for those students who want a great deal of structure in their process it may be just what is needed to assure successful completion of the project.

Many more possibilities exist. For some it may be effective to have coaching sessions with other students in the room. Some may want to make visual representations of their speeches to aid them in the composition process. Some may want to work very hard on one event for a short amount of time, and then leave it alone for a while. Some may want to write their debate cases in the squad room while others may need to be alone in a clean space.

As can be seen, learning styles can be a highly valuable tool for the Forensics coach and for the competitor. Learning styles have been used successfully in many educational settings and can easily work for us. As we adapt our coaching and learning to the individual styles of the students we can use our time more effectively, and goals may be achieved more easily.

Learning styles are only one example of an educational concept that can easily be adapted to the special needs of the Forensics world. As coaches we have a great opportunity to work with students in close contact, to spend much time with them. Whatever else we do, it is important that we consider ourselves teachers during much of that time and use those techniques and ideas that will let us fulfill that role more fully. When training coaches we cannot forget this either. There are many things a Forensics coach needs to know and to learn, and one of the most important ones is to know how to use the most effective ways of teaching our students while coaching.